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## JOURNAL OF LEWIS BIRDSALL HARRIS, 1836-1842

## III

After resting a while my brother and myself concluded to build a house on the site of the one burned by the Mexicans. The great difficulty was lumber. The saw mill built by my father in Harrisburg was burned by the Mexicans, but hearing that the Sawmill at Lynchburg about 20 miles below, at the mouth of Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto river, would soon be started up, we concluded to build of logs and by the time the mill would be ready we could get our cribs up and roof on and be ready for the flooring etc. We procured four additional Mexicans and axes and started them to cutting down pine trees of suitable size, and cutting them of the right lengths. It was amusing to see them use an axe, something they had never seen before. Of course they spoke no English and we spoke no Spanish and everything had to be done by signs, but I soon learned enough Spanish to be able to get along very well. We were rather aspiring in our ideas of a house and concluded to build it the same size and shape of our Grandfathers house in Seneca Co. N. Y, only not as high, (that was 3 stories,) which is 56 feet long by 36 feet wide, divided into four rooms 22 by 18, and a Hall thro' the center 12 feet wide. There was not a carpenter to be had in the country, the nearest to it was an old dutchman Henry Tushmaker called "Dutch Henry" who was in the battle of San Jacinto and was wounded with a bullet in his powder horn, which he always carried slung around his shoulders and exhibited on all occasions. The ball was a spent ball and remained embedded in the horn where it lodged. We procured Henry to hew the logs which he did fairly well after they had been scored by the Mexicans. We finally cleared away the debris of the old house and set the Mexicans to preparing the foundations. One of them attracted my attention by getting down on his knees and gathering a lot of twigs and commenced puffing away at them, and said "blow blow blow" and pointing to the logs lying around said, "chop, chop, chop." I found afterwards that he was one

of the very men who had under order set fire to the house he was now rebuilding.

I found one of the Mexicans quite handy with cattle and we broke in with the help of a yoke of gentle oxen enough others to haul our hewn logs to the place. We found it a more difficult matter to get our saw logs into the water, but finally managed it, and got enough to make a raft, which by the help of two of the mexicans who became expert oarsmen, we towed to the saw mill at Lynchburg, and had them sawed up into flooring and boards and rafted the lumber back. We built our house on large oak blocks several feet from the ground, making "4 pens and a passage," until we got it to the proper height for the first story, when we cut our logs the full length 56 and 36 feet, determined to have one room the full size of the house. The roof consisted of peeled pine poles hewed on one side, with split laths on which we laid split boards 3 feet long. Of course it took us a long time to do all this work with the facilities we had at hand, and it was not in a condition to be occupied until the winter. We also built a kitchen of logs about 18 by 20 with a loft, in which we lived for some time before our big house was ready to occupy. This had a large fire place in one end and a chimney of sticks plastered with clay.

In attending to having my lumber sawed at Lynchburg I made the acquaintance of a very pleasant family consisting of Col. McComb, whose father was Gen. McComb of the U. S. Army. He had a daughter about my age who, tho' not handsome, was very bright and intelligent and cultivated, sang and played well and learned and played for me a piece of music which I found on the battle ground of San Jacinto. She would some times go up home with me in my skiff rowed by the two Mexicans and they would make the skiff hum, sometimes making the distance in 3 or 4 hours.

As I kept no notes after this what I write of my life in Texas will be from memory and written long after the occurrence, and I will mention some things which I have not spoken of in my personal narrative.

My father after being engaged in business in St Louis and at what is now Montgomery met Col. Austin in New Orleans, who

induced him to go with him to Texas where he had concessions from the Mexican Government for colonization. My father liked Texas so well that he concluded to establish himself there. This was in 1824. He built a house at Harrisburg—the one burned by the Mexicans and also built a saw mill there. He located a league of land including the townsite, which was considered at the very head of navigation on Buffalo Bayou for here any vessel that could cross Redfish and Cloppers bars would come, and no further. He also received several other large concessions of land from the Mexican Gov't had a large store of goods at Harrisburg and was trading between there and New Orleans doing a prosperous business. . . .

In 1829 my father died of yellow fever at New Orleans, and my grandfather Birdsall went to Texas to look after his estate, but his health was poor and returned without getting any satisfaction. In 1833 my mother determined to go herself, and taking my elder brother who was then only 18 years old, she went and took possession of the house, and my brother went to merchandizing, waiting until matters should be more settled, as everything was in confusion and culminated in 1835 when the revolution took place and was consummated in 1836.

In the Fall of 1836 Congress met, organized counties and fixed the seat of Government at Houston. There was a universal desire to fix it at Harrisburg. Houston was 15 miles up the Bayou and it took weeks of cutting away logs and trees before they could get up with a yawl boat, but after great labor and cutting off the point of White Oak Bayou they got a small steamboat there and were able to turn it around.<sup>1</sup>

When Harrisburg, afterwards Harris Co,—was organized my

<sup>1</sup>The death of John R. Harris was followed by an administration upon his estate based upon trumped up claims. Texas was then under Mexican government, the courts in the hands of a few men, and everything unsettled. The heirs of John R. Harris filed suit against the administrator and Harris and Wilson, begging the court to set aside all former proceedings on account of fraud; postponements from time to time kept the case pending for years, until finally in 1838 it was settled by compromise. This litigation, more than anything else, prevented the location of the new seat of government at Harrisburg at the time when this honor was bestowed upon Houston. Its situation at the head of navigation on Buffalo Bayou made it by far the better site at a period when water transportation was without a rival.

brother was elected county clerk. My Grandfather and Grandmother and Uncle Maurice Birdsall and my sister came out about this time and my sister married afterwards Capt. Andrew Briscoe, who was at the head of a Co. at San Jacinto, and had been my brothers partner in business.

When the courts were organized Capt. Briscoe was made County Judge, and as the County seat was also fixed at Houston, Judge Briscoe and wife, my brother and myself went there, and I went into my brother's office as deputy. His health failed him and he was advised to go north, and the supervisors appointed me County Clerk pro tem, and upon his return they elected me County Assessor; everything about both offices was new and we had nothing to guide us but the statutes and the lawyers. Some of them did not know much law or much precedent, but we got along very well and made money hand over fist, but it was "Texas money," it did very well at first and passed current at par, but before annexation it got so low that I used to stuff it in between the logs of my room in bundles.

In assessing the property of the county I had various experiences. The county took in the present county and the county of Galveston, but as there were no improvements on Galveston Island then, I did not have to go there. As none of the people had been assessed before I had great difficulty in explaining to some of them the necessity and the object of my work. Old Mrs. McCormick, owner of the land on which the battle of San Jacinto was fought, at first would hardly let me come into her house, and said her land was not worth anything after being covered with dead Mexicans, and being Irish, was especially opposed to tax gatherers.

The country was sparsely populated and I had chills and fever every other day, but as they came on regularly about dark, on my chill days I would make my destination and get to bed and have my chill and fever, and get up next morning and ride 25 or 30 miles. This went on for weeks when I stopped at a house and told the lady of the house that I wanted to get to bed as I would soon have a chill. She said, "get into bed and cover up warm," and she soon came with a bowl of hot toddy and told me to drink it down and cover up head and ears and keep so. I

followed her instructions, was soon in a profuse perspiration and as it was kept up I had no chill, and whenever my chills returned I repeated this prescription and was finally relieved of them entirely. As the remedy is a pretty severe one I would not recommend it only in extreme cases. Gen. Houston, the president, was a frequent visitor at our house in Harrisburg, and was quite a friend of mine and urged me to take the office of Post Master at Houston. After the term of my brothers office expired I went to Harrisburg and lived, engaging in farming and lumbering, running saw mills etc. At one time I had two saw mills running and attended to cutting the logs, hauling them, rafting, sometimes attending the engines or saws, shipping the lumber to Houston or Galveston, and worked night and day, but the profits were small. In June 1846 I married Jane Wilcox.

During all this time the Mexicans made frequent inroads upon the Western settlements and each able bodied man kept himself in readiness to respond to any call to go and repel them on two or three of these occasions I went with others, but before we could come up with them the Mexicans would retreat into Mexico. On the last expedition it was determined to follow them across the border and the famous Somerville expedition was fitted out. Each one equipped himself with horse, rifle and side arms and three or four would join together and furnish a pack mule. The Mexicans [in 1842] had come into San Antonio and taken the Judge prisoner and had come nearly to La Grange where they ambushed a party of 25 or 30 Texans, and killed nearly all of them, and then retreated to the Rio Grande and got away with small loss. I was in the Co. of Cap't Lowery and was orderly sergeant of the Co. We "took" Laredo but without a fight. We crossed into Mexico and laid several of the towns under contribution for provisions etc, but found no troops. We fell down the river on our side opposite Guerrero and determined to cross and lay that town under contribution. Our scouts had seen quite a force near there and we expected some warm work. When we came to the crossing the boats had all been removed. We found two "dugouts" which would carry 6 or 7 men each, and it was determined that the advance should be made by crossing enough men in these two boats to go up the Geneva river and get the

ferry boats which had been removed by the enemy. My company was at the front, and I being the orderly of the Company who always marched at the head, made it my place to be in one of these two boats to cross over; it would have been under other circumstances and with other than Mexicans for foes a foolhardy thing to do, but as it was, we crossed almost in the face of them, at first landing only 12 men. We had to sit in the bottom of the canoe each with his rifle across his knees and were not allowed to touch the gunwales or the frail craft would upset. In this way we were paddled by one man in the stern across the river, and landed on the Mexican side. As soon as our Co. got safely across, about 50, we marched up the small stream which emptied into the river just below, and found two ferry boats, which were soon brought to the crossing and the whole force taken over; the Mexicans kept at a safe distance and made no attack, altho' they made several feints and kept us on the *qui vive*.

At this time we received a peremptory order from Gen. Houston to return and not advance any further into Mexico. We laid Guerrero under contribution however, and got a small lot of provisions and then recrossed the river; there was intense disgust felt by the whole force and at one time it looked as though there would be a general revolt, but better councils prevailed. There were a few more hot headed, who determined to separate from the command and cross the river, and, as they expressed it, rake down the settlements on the Mexican side and bring in as many cattle and horses as they could manage.

I don't know what I might have done, but I had been suffering for weeks with what I suppose was a carbuncle in one of my legs; there came a swelling like a boil which came to a head and the core left a hole in my leg nearly an inch in diameter in which one could almost see the cords. I had to keep a poultice of slippery elm bark, laudanum and charcoal on it constantly, and rode with my leg resting on my horses neck. Otherwise, I too, might have joined the party, for I was very much disgusted with the order. I divided all my ammunition with two boys 16 or 17 years old, one named Beal. I think there were 30 or 40 left us. We started on our return trip as disgusted and demoralized a set as you ever saw. We had no provisions of any kind. We had

killed all the cattle which we had driven with us and were dependent on what game we could pick up; to make matters worse, on our return our guide, an Indian, got bewildered in the dense chapperal, which we encountered and through which we endeavored to cut our way, the sun was obscured and the chapperal was so thick that one could not tell in what direction he was going, our line had to go in single file and we found that when night came we had come around very nearly to the point from which we started in the morning. We were in the chapperal several days. When we emerged, we were entirely out of provisions of any kind, my mess consisting of 9 men had killed and eaten a yearling colt the last resource we had except the horses we rode, which would have been very poor eating. Many cooked their cowhide packing "aparahoes" or large pouches for packing their provisions; there was such a large body of us that it was almost impossible for any of us to find game, but on one occasion several of us got a shot at a buck, and as it fell, we—being in a hurry, as we were some distance in the rear of the line—each gathered a leg of the deer and skinned down to the back, and as each one let go to get in position to take out the entrails the deer jumped up and ran the skin flapping as it ran. "Ha! Ha!" exclaimed Ben McCulluch "thats the Devil sure." In fact we were all so startled and it was such a strange occurrence that for a few moments we stood and looked at each other in dumb amazement, but one of us who had venison steaks in his vision, took up his rifle and followed, a shot soon brought us up to him where he had shot the deer again, where he found it lying down. This divided out among us four, and divided among our messes did not go very far. One of our party succeeded in shooting a sand hill crane at a distance 130 yards, and that we made into soup to make it go as far as possible.

I was not in a very good condition for hunting, but concluded I would try it one evening, and dropping behind the command I started out. I had not gone far before I saw a fine large buck standing within easy range looking after the retreating troops. I took a steady aim feeling sure of venison steaks for supper, and pulled the trigger, when snap went the cap and off went the deer. My heart dropped into my boots, and I had to hurry up and



catch the command, and we did not get any other chance at game for 4 days. We came to Attascosa creek about sun down, and we heard turkeys flying into the trees; by this time the command was broken up and each party shirked for himself. Our mess had kept together. We soon struck camp and each one of us started for a turkey, and I suppose as each one thot he would be the only one that would get one, we all stayed out until each of us did get one. We soon had a rousing fire and we soon had each our turkey on a stick stuck in the ground and before the fire. We did not do any seasoning, for we did not have even salt, but as a piece became cooked we cut it off and found it very palatable without salt, and I think there was no time during that night that you might not have seen some one eating turkey, and by morning there were nine turkey skeletons resting around the camp.

We soon got into San Antonio where the balance of the command all straggled in, and while at a supper given by Mrs. [no name] news came that the party under Gen. Tom Green which had seceded from us, had all been taken prisoners at Mier, a small town below Guerrero, after a hard fight, the Mexicans as usual getting the men to surrender under false promises; this of course cast a deep gloom over us. We all had intimate friends among them; these men instead of being sent to Matamoras and from there home as promised, were marched into the interior and confined in barracks where they afterwards rose up on their guards and regained their liberty, only to fall into the hands of the Mexicans again, after untold hardships from hunger and thirst in a country entirely strange to them and devoid of water and the means of sustaining life. Most of them had to come in and give themselves up and they were then decimated and shot; the Mexicans put white and black beans in a receptable, a bean for each man, every tenth bean was a black one; the men were compelled to draw out a bean, and those who drew black ones were shot and the others were finally allowed to go free. Those who were to be shot walked out and showed such manliness and firmness that they commanded the admiration of the Mexican officers; the two boys with whom I divided my amunition, I was told, showed remarkable coolness and bravery in the battle at

Mier, they would walk out in full view of the enemy and kneel on one knee and take deliberate aim, and always brought down their man, they would step back and reload and step out again; their action attracted the attention of the officers in command, and when they had surrendered they took the boys with them and showed them every kindness. I was told one of them was adopted by the Mexican Commander and remained in the country permanently.

This expedition was in the winter and altho my mess started pretty well provided, our animals became so reduced that we had to abandon our tent, so that we slept on the ground in the open air. I have left the imprint of my body on the ground where I had slept over night, and in a short time after I got up it would fill with water. On our return we had to cross branches and sloughs of the Nueces River 8 or 9 times, each time swimming by the side of our riding animals; this was on Christmas day, and with my leg in the condition it was it is a wonder how I ever got through, but the boys were very kind, they would push ahead, and by the time I got to camp they would have a rousing fire so that I could dry my clothes.

When we had got about 100 miles from the Rio Grande on our return Cap't Jack Hayes discovered that his fine clay bank horse, a present from Tennessee, had got away and gone back. He determined to go after him, so he mounted another horse and went back alone. When he came back with his horse a week afterwards he said that he found him in the stable where he had kept him at a Mexican Ranch; he slipped in at night and took him out without being discovered by the Mexicans, who had all returned to the ranch, and brought him back in triumph.

This was the last expedition I was in. I travelled a good deal thro the country and made one trip to Austin soon after the seat of Gov't was located there. In this trip I was alone, on a fine large horse. I stopped at a house near Washington on the Brassos, my proper route was to La Grange on the Colorado River and then up the river among the settlements to Bastrop, but during the evening the landlord said that about 80 miles could be saved by taking the Goshen trace, which left his place and went straight thro' the country to a point on the San Antonio

and Nacogdoches road near Bastrop, but that there was no habitation in the whole distance and that the country was the favorite haunt of the hostile Indians. There were a couple of Mississippians there, who were on their way to Austin, and I persuaded them that it would be perfectly safe for 3 of us to take this route, so next morning we were put on the trail as soon as we could see,—it was mid winter—after we had been well provided with lunch. All went well for about 20 miles. We found a trail that far and then it gave out. Our route being thro' scattering timber we foll[ow]ed by the blazed trees for 10 or 15 miles farther, when they could no longer be found. I knew the course and told my companions that if they would trust to me I would take them thro' all right, and struck out at a good round trot taking the sun for my guide. I had already cautioned them to observe the strictest silence and we made so little noise that we would some times come up to deer within 20 yards without disturbing them; but one of the men declared I was bearing too far away from the river and he would strike out for himself. I divided the provisions and pushed on with my one companion, but I noticed the other man did not go off far from us and finally fell in behind. When the sun went down I took a star and travelled by it and kept my course and directed my companions to keep a sharp look out for any appearance of a road crossing our path; this road not having been used for years I knew would be pretty hard to find in the night and everything depended on our finding it. About 9 o'clock we came to it and altho' covered pretty much with dried grass I made sure it was what we were looking for and took it and pushed on towards the river, feeling very confident that it would take us into Bastrop, and I was not disappointed. We got in there about 11 o'clock. After putting up our horses we went into the Hotel and while getting something warm several men came up and as usual asked where we were from, and what news etc. I remarked that we came from Houston, told some news about what had occurred at Washington the evening before; they looked at me and said "you cant mean yesterday," I said, "yes." They asked, "how could you come 160 miles since yesterday evening," and when I told him we had come by the Goshen trace, they would hardly believe it. "Why,"

they said, "the place is full of Indians, and yesterday they killed a family only about 20 miles below here on this side of the river, and you could not come through there once in 50 times and not meet Indians.

It was a pretty hard ride of 80 miles, so next morning I concluded to change from horseback to buggy, and got one and put my horse in, and started for Austin. In fording the Colorado the water came up into the buggy and was very swift; about the middle of the river the traces broke, and my horse went to the end of the shaft and turned around. I was still holding the lines but pulling thro' the ring was pulling him away from me instead of towards me, and I was in a fix. I was afraid to get out of the buggy fearing the current would take me away. I finally spoke to my horse, and he marched right out to me, when I took a rope and fastened to the shafts, and holding on to it jumped on my horse and he took the buggy ashore. The Indians came into Austin while I was there and took all the straps out of Major Brigham's harness and carried away a number of horses.

[The Journal ends here. The letters which follow describe the beginning of the writer's journey to California.]

Onion Creek,  
Camp Near Austin  
May 3rd. 1849.

Dear Clint

I suppose you think we ought to be half way to California before this, but we have moved along very slowly, partly from choice and partly on account of bad roads, but since arriving in the up country we have found the roads good and been able to travel from 18 to 20 miles a day. We all have enjoyed excellent health altho we have been in one very heavy storm, and two or three small ones, but we weathered them out without any difficulty, and have met with no bad luck or breakage, except a wagon tongue, and that I was glad of as we got a good one by the means. If I can get in with Thompson's Company in which are 3 or 4 families viz (his own and one or two of his sons and daughters families) I think I shall go on with them. If I do not fall in with them, or if Worth does not go I think I shall give it up. One thing, I shall not undertake the trip unless I go with a company strong enough to go through, and composed of those in whom I have the greatest confidence, nor will I go with a company in which there are no families.

I saw Harbut and he promised to let me know how soon he

could come up in case I did not go on. I think I will go on to Fredericksburg and then determine what to do.

I will write from there and afterwards every opportunity. Our love to mother and all our folks.

Your brother

Lew B. Harris.

Austin May 4, We arrived here to-day and leave tomorrow. I found the folks here all well. Ann has a fine boy and they all pet it alike. Mr and Mrs. Raymond think as much of it as its mother.

L. B. H.

General Worth is dead, so says report.

Clinton.

Dear Clinton

In hopes of getting an opportunity of sending a letter from Paso by some of the guides sent on by Maj. Neighbors with Thompsons train I shall scribble a little to you so as to have it ready on an emergency and not be caught as we were when Maj. Neighbors came up— We were just nooning it, and all had so many inquiries to make and so much information to gain about the route that I for one could not spend time to write but a few lines. I thought when I started that I would have kept a journal of our route, but when I came to pay my attention to two head of animals and attend to the necessary camp and company duties, I found very little leisure to do so. I shall however make out a correct description of our route— the distance to water &c. and send by this. We have found the road so far a most remarkable one for the distance, after we pass'd Neighbors we came to only one large hill or mountain the ascent of which was very gradual, the descent was only sufficiently precipitate to occasion a little sport for the boys— by fastening ropes to the after axletree and a dozen men holding on, we came down with our whole team attached, and the same number of men half a day could render the descent perfectly easy by merely locking one wheel. The balance of the road ran through a valley and over a level country (until we came to the mountains of the Pecos,) we found two very pretty running streams after leaving the San Saba, one good Spring Creek (and it proved to be so to us for by negligence we lay all night without water for ourselves or animals the night before we came to it.) here we found the grave of poor young Fuller under a beautiful Live oak and the scenery about it very pretty and at the very verge of what I call the good country— After leaving this stream we crossed Farchehar Creek, another cool running stream. In 15 miles we came to the Concho a muddy dirty looking stream and the country poor and barren, where we struck it, but growing better as we ascended the valley until I began to think it was quite a pretty valley of

land. one thing certain there never was as much good land passed over by the same length of road as we have passed. After leaving the Concho we struck across the table land for the Pecos, the ascent to the dividing ridge is so gradual that you hardly know when you have reached it and begin to descend, the distance from the head of the Concho to the Pecos is about 65 miles and over as good a road as could be formed by the art of man, we came the distance in part of two days and two nights on account of water, and came through the Pass in the mountains in the night, a distance of about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile, and I believe I locked one wheel 3 times and would not then have considered it necessary if it had been day time. It was a most magnificent sight to see the long train of wagons and pack mules winding their way through the Pass by moonlight, the rocks almost overhanging them on either side and towering up for hundreds of feet into the sky, every object almost appearing ready to transform itself into an indignant Commanche or Apache ready to roll the rocks upon our heads for transforming their long used war trail into a good smooth wagon road. After getting through the Pass we struck the valley of the long talked of but little known Pecos, and I must say that so far (and we have travelled up it now about 60 miles) I would not pay taxes on one league of it if the Gov. would donate the balance to me. We have had nothing but one strong stream of dust and sand since we struck it and the sand now covers my ink as I write so as to make a sand box superfluous. The stream is at this time about as large across as Brays Bayou at its mouth but very deep—bluff banks running like a mill race and muddier than the Mississippi and the water is quite salty so that it is very disagreeable to use. We found our Boat here indispensable it answered a splendid purpose and crossed every thing in a few hours, in fact we were only detained here about 24 hours and that mostly on account of recreating our animals after the long march.